

# NUTRITION

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## Food Allergy vs. Food Intolerance

Food allergy affects up to 6 to 8 percent of children under the age of 3 and close to 4 percent of adults. If you have an unpleasant reaction to something you have eaten, you might wonder if you have a food allergy. One out of three people either believe they have a food allergy or modify their or their family's diet. Thus, while food allergy is commonly suspected, healthcare providers diagnose it less frequently than most people believe.

**Food allergy** is an abnormal response to a food triggered by the body's immune system. Food allergy refers to a particular type of response of the immune system in which the body produces what is called an allergic, or IgE, antibody to a food. (IgE, or immunoglobulin E, is a type of protein that works against a specific food.) Allergic reactions to food can cause serious illness and, in some cases, death. Therefore, if you have a food allergy, it is extremely important for you to work with your healthcare provider to find out what food or foods cause your allergic reaction.

Sometimes, a reaction to food is not an allergy at all but another type of reaction called "food intolerance." **Food intolerance** is more common than food allergy. The immune system does not cause the symptoms of food intolerance, though these symptoms may look and feel like those of a food allergy. To find out the difference between food allergy and food intolerance, your provider will go through a list of possible causes for your symptoms. This is called a "differential diagnosis." This type of diagnosis helps confirm that you do indeed have a food allergy rather than a food intolerance or other illness.

### Quick Facts

- Food allergy occurs in 6 to 8 percent of children 4 years of age or under, and in 3.7 percent of adults.
- Allergy to peanuts and tree nuts in the general population is, respectively, 0.6 percent and 0.4 percent, with the rate in children under age 18 (0.8 percent and 0.2 percent) slightly different from adults (0.6 percent and 0.5 percent respectively). These two foods are the leading causes of fatal and near fatal food-allergic reactions.
- In spite of attempts to avoid allergenic foods, accidental exposures are the major causes of allergic reactions to foods. Over a period of two years, approximately 50 percent of subjects in the United States with food allergy have an allergic reaction to accidental exposure.
- In the United States, there are approximately 30,000 episodes of food-induced anaphylaxis, associated with 100 to 200 deaths; most deaths occur in adolescents and young adults.
- Food allergy is the most frequent single cause of emergency room visits for anaphylaxis and accounts for 34 to 52 percent of these visits.

